

‘I’ve Heard o’ Food Queues, but This Is the First Time I’ve Ever Heard of a Feeding Queue!’: Hunger Strikers, War, and the State, 1914–61

During wars and conflicts, state bodies can assume unprecedented levels of power. By declaring states of emergency under the aegis of protecting their citizens, governments can acquire discretionary powers that impinge upon personal privacy, resort to actions that would normally be deemed unacceptable during peace-time and allow political opponents to be detained, often without trial.¹ Inevitably, this works unfavourably for politicised prisoners. War breeds hatred and contempt which is often reflected in severe institutional treatment. In such circumstances, hunger striking can be exceptionally common. Physical and emotional violence suffered in prisons encourages a desire to reassert bodily autonomy. In turn, the broader context of war allows governments to reaffirm their conviction that hunger strikers form part of a group that poses a threat to socio-political order. In wartime, hunger striking takes place in the face of powerful discourses on the danger seemingly posed by political dissidents to the safety of the nation. Acts such as force-feeding help to reinforce the sovereignty of the state on a physical and metaphorical level. When performing the procedure, prison doctors help to re-establish prison order but also overtly contribute to the broader political project of protecting national security. To worsen matters even further for hunger strikers, media coverage can be censored, interpersonal violence can be justified by the exigencies of war, and prisoners can be easily denounced as enemies of the state at times of patriotic fervour. In a frenzy of panic over ‘terror’ and enemy threats, the public is discouraged from caring about the plight of disruptive prisoners.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of conscientious objectors in First World War England. After 1917, force-feeding was no longer resorted to in Ireland. However, force-feeding policies remained in place in England. During the First World War, politicised prisoners, while hunger striking, were exposed to harrowing levels of institutional violence and brutality. Their subversive ideas seemed to threaten national order, a problem that bred contempt between staff and prisoners. Conscientious objectors sought peace in an era of heightened patriotism.

Somewhat paradoxically, wartime hunger strikers are often adept at drawing public attention to unacceptable institutional conditions. While imprisoned, politicised prisoners can do little to challenge the government that has incarcerated them. But wars end and opportunities arise to speak out. This was certainly the case for First World War conscientious objectors. In the 1920s, exposure to disproportionate violence and suffering encouraged many of them to campaign for prison reform. Some brought considerable change to the prison system. Deaths from starvation and brutal force-feedings buttressed the broader claim that early twentieth-century prisons were beset with problems; that the disciplinary functions of these sites were excessive and unjust. Prisons, by their very nature, are enigmatic sites. The disciplinary regimes enacted within them on the bodies of prisoners are mostly hidden from public view. However, politicised prisoners are often skilled at gathering support for prisoner welfare concerns. Upon release, they prove remarkably vocal about their institutional experiences. As Martin J. Weiner suggests, politicised prisoners tend to feel extremely alienated from authority and are particularly sensitive to mistreatment. Many are highly articulate.² They are able to convey details of prison life in a way that the majority of convict prisoners cannot. Many are educated and communicate their memories eloquently and fluently. Through their writings and campaigning, they bring to light conditions that normally remain hidden from public view. In turn, tales of excessive suffering jar with public sensitivities towards pain and torture, sparking debate about governmental support of dismal institutional conditions, unethical behaviour, and inhumane treatment. The rational political logic of protecting national security can certainly lend support to mass internment or wartime imprisonment, as well as the claim that hunger strikers inflict death upon themselves. But, the emotional economies of western societies provide a counterbalance. Suffering, after all, is something which the barbaric enemy supposedly enacts. It holds no place in a society battling to maintain its values of humanity and decency. When

investigating the relationship between governments and hunger strikers, historians have regularly outlined the complexities of political manoeuvrings.³ However hunger strikes have rarely been contextualised in relation to ideas about the body, pain, and emotions. A distinct emotional script exists in the public sphere that counters the rational logic adopted by governments in tackling hunger strikes at times of crisis, a world of feeling that condemns actions such as force-feeding that seem to contradict western sensibilities on suffering.⁴

In recent years, an outflowing of best-selling autobiographical literature from released Guantánamo detainees testifies to the high interest in the plight of prisoners considered to be treated unfairly during the 'war on terror'.⁵ Hunger strikers find ways to publicly challenge the governments that mistreat them. While support for radical religious extremism is limited in the west, enthusiasm for anti-terror measures and military intervention in Islamic countries is far from universal. A humanitarian narrative exists that has called into question the capacity of the state to detain individuals and use doctors to force-feed. An inherent tension exists between the rational political logic of imposing punishment at times of crisis to help maintain socio-political order and the emotions involved in sympathising with prisoners imagined to be in pain. Indeed, the stories told by released Guantánamo detainees have inspired considerable opposition to the feeding methods currently being used in the name of the 'war on terror'.⁶

FORCE-FEEDING CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

During the First World War, large numbers of conscientious objectors refused to fight. In Britain, many accepted civilian work or service in non-combatant Corps. A small, but vocal, group of absolutists refused to compromise. These individuals had been conscripted and classified as soldiers but refused to perform military service. They found themselves in a recurrent cycle of being court-martialled, imprisoned, and released. While in prison, they disobeyed institutional rules on the grounds of conscience and, emulating militant suffragettes and Irish republicans, actively sought to undermine the prison system.⁷ David Boulton estimates that, in total, 1543 conscientious objectors served sentences in English prisons.⁸ While incarcerated, they faced extraordinary levels of contempt and physical violence. They had objected to conflict at a time when the state and much of the population supported war. Their harshest critics dismissively portrayed them as degenerate, effeminate, and unhealthy, not to mention inherently

dangerous. Their refusal to fight threatened to jeopardise the national war effort.⁹

Faced with antagonism, violence, and deplorable living conditions, many conscientious objectors went on hunger strike. Prison doctors forced them brutally. A considerable number of hunger strikers quickly capitulated. When Wandsworth Prison's medical officer, James Pitcairn, tried to feed one conscientious objector, the stomach tube 'proved disagreeable'. Writhing in pain, the prisoner swiftly resumed eating.¹⁰ Nonetheless, others unwaveringly endured remarkably long periods of being fed against their will. In 1917, Joseph Garstand was force-fed for thirteen days. In the same year, J.W. Illingworth endured forty-five days of being fed in Birmingham. Between 1917 and 1918, prison doctors fed Frank Higgins twenty-two times in Newcastle, followed by a longer period of sixty-three days.¹¹ The infliction of suffering upon men with peaceful, pacifistic tendencies aroused an emotional public response, demonstrating that public sensibilities towards needless violence could co-exist with support for the war effort. Although intense animosity was felt towards men who refused to fight, a perceptible unease emerged towards using excessive force on peaceful prisoners. The exigencies of war provided state bodies and prison officials with a rationale for supporting, or turning a blind eye to, physical and psychological intimidation, particularly when directed at seemingly contemptuous individuals. However prisons were no longer meant to be sites of pain, violence, and brutality. In theory, prisons were now intended to rehabilitate, not engage in relentless disciplining.

In light of this conflicting opinion, the plight of conscientious objectors attracted the attention of sections of left-wing newspapers, most notably those which had denounced force-feeding during the recent suffragette hunger strike campaign. Circumventing wartime censorship, the *Manchester Guardian* regularly published (necessarily objective) reports on the predicament of conscientious objectors such as Manchester silver engraver, Emmanuel Ribeiro. In January 1917, Emmanuel was court-martialled for refusing to undertake military service. He found himself removed to military barracks in Bury where he went on hunger strike. Emmanuel was then transported to a military hospital in nearby Warrington and force-fed for seventeen months. Six months into Emmanuel's feedings, James MacPherson, Under-Secretary of State for War, stated in the House of Commons that Emmanuel was not resisting the prison doctors. The feedings were in no way 'forceful', he suggested, because Emmanuel was compliant.¹² Contradictory accounts, published in the *Manchester*

Guardian, suggested that Emmanuel's feedings were in fact painful and deeply degrading. In July, Constance Lytton contacted Emmanuel's wife asking if he had sent any personal accounts from the prison. Emmanuel had. In these, he claimed that he had actively resisted the prison doctors for the first three months. He wrote:

They force a gag into my mouth which causes terrible pain. Then a tube was put in the mouth and forced into my stomach ... with six men holding me down from moving. On Tuesday ... I resisted after falling on the ground; they, with all hands holding me on the ground, forcibly-fed me there. This I say is scandalous. It is not only inhuman but barbarous torture of the worst kind.

In his mournful letters, Emmanuel portrayed a system of institutional intimidation intent on violently ending his protest. He portrayed force-feeding as a daunting encounter with a vast network of medical, institutional, and military power determined to bring his errant behaviour (or viewpoints) into line by forcing food into his gullet. Emily Lutyens, Lytton's sister, argued in the *Manchester Guardian* that 'apart from the question of humanity, it would seem to be a waste of the manhood of the nation in this time of war to employ six able-bodied men to torture one defenceless man.'¹³ But using military manpower to undermine a protest undertaken by a single individual served symbolic purposes. Exerting power and authority over one conscientious objector allowed the state to make visible its determination to maintain social and institutional order, uphold the authority of its conscription Acts, and deter like-minded individuals from refusing to fight. It set a strong example to others on the need for national solidarity at a time of international crisis.

In February 1918, a friend obtained permission to visit Emmanuel. By this stage, Emmanuel had been force-fed for thirteen months. He reported to the *Manchester Guardian* that:

Ribeiro was forcibly-fed during our visit but we were not allowed to witness the process, although we saw the tube brought in. It was over in a few minutes, and when we returned he was ill and giddy from the effect of the treatment. He was evidently suffering with very strong movements of the heart. He pressed his hand hard on his left breast, seemed pale and exhausted, and for a time could only speak with difficulty ... I consider that the condition of Ribeiro is alarming, his health being much worse than when I last saw him. I fear he will die if not quickly liberated.

This statement encouraged readers to empathise with Emmanuel by detailing a gradual breakdown brought on by having a stomach tube involuntarily forced deep into his body. Force-feeding was portrayed as physically and emotionally exhausting; as a procedure that debilitated, rather than restored, the health of starving prisoners. On the basis of this account, conscientious objector, physician, and Labour politician, Alfred Salter, asserted that ‘the authorities know that he will never be in a fit state of health to be court-martialled yet still they continue their persecution of him rather than discharge him.’¹⁴ Five months later, the *Manchester Guardian* subtly reported that ‘Emmanuel Ribeiro, the Manchester conscientious objector, who has been on hunger-strike for seventeen months, has been released from Wormwood Scrubs Prison owing to the serious condition of his health’, adding that ‘it was time’.¹⁵ Emmanuel’s force-feeding was an overtly political act supported by a wartime state that clashed with public sensitivities towards pain, medical ethics, and institutional norms. However objectionable refusing to fight might have seemed, performing force-feeding for over a year appeared morally problematic and somewhat futile. If anything, it seemed to highlight the state’s inherent vindictiveness. For such reasons, Emmanuel amassed support from eminent individuals, including Constance Lytton. The ethical discussion that ensued about Emmanuel’s force-feeding shared similarities with earlier debates on the plight of hunger striking suffragettes. Yet the broader context of war in which conscientious objectors staged hunger strikes meant greater exposure to antagonism, resentment, hostility, and violence. The force-fed body of a male conscientious objector held less political currency than that of a female suffragette body, particularly when damage and harm had been inflicted upon it to support the popular wartime cause.

The experiences of other conscientious objectors held in military prisons further demonstrate that war amplified the viciousness of prison encounters. In 1917, conscientious objector, Clarence Henry Norman, prosecuted Lieutenant Reginald Brooke for unlawful assault. The *Manchester Guardian* reported on the proceedings. Henry alleged that he had been spat on, placed in a strait-jacket, verbally abused, and force-fed at Wandsworth Detention Barracks. He had initially been detained for refusing to submit to a medical examination or put on a military uniform. The lieutenant defended his belligerence by claiming that he had no option but to place Henry in a strait-jacket. The prisoner was clearly suicidal, having announced his intention to die from hunger and thirst. During his multiple feedings, Brooke aggressively yelled ‘coward’, ‘swine’, ‘beast’,

and 'sham conscientious objector'. Verbal abuse had been necessary, the lieutenant insisted, as Henry was a coward, not a conscientious objector. He fully deserved every word of the strong language uttered to him.¹⁶

In the following year, another conscientious objector, imprisoned at Newcastle, was reportedly forced to his cell floor and held down by several officers to have a feeding tube forced through his nose so violently that it caused intense bleeding. The prison doctor sat laughing at the prisoner, taunting him by imitating his moans and cries. The incident was discussed in the House of Commons.¹⁷ The few accounts that entered the public domain demonstrate the extremities of violence directed towards hunger striking conscientious objectors. War could be used to justify verbal intimidation, unwarranted intrusions in the inner body, and psychological humiliation. Conscientious objectors were made to suffer as they posed a national threat. Such assaults embodied the exertion of sovereign power onto the bodies of those deemed too cowardly to fight.

Even death was of little consequence. Censorship could be used to hide details from the public; prison doctors could deny responsibility while feeling little remorse over the death of a traitor to the nation. The passing away of a conscientious objector did not carry the same emotional meanings in wartime England as Thomas Ashe's death had done in revolutionary Ireland. In England, pacifists were cast as cowards, not heroes. In 1918, a conscientious objector named William Edward Burns passed away in Hull Prison after a bout of force-feeding. An inquiry was overseen by prominent surgeon and bacteriologist, William Watson Cheyne, and Guy's Hospital physician Maurice Craig. Notably, Craig had been called upon by the Home Office during the trial of *Leigh v Gladstone* where he had openly supported the official line on 'artificial feeding' as safe, necessary, and therapeutic.¹⁸ His appointment at this inquiry was hardly impartial. At the inquiry, it transpired that William had gone on hunger strike to protest against receiving inadequate medical attention and to obtain a transfer (by weakening himself) to a nearby nursing home. The prison doctor, Dr Howlett, admitted that he had noted Burns' anaemic appearance but had decided that all conscientious objectors suffered from the condition. 'They are anaemic in their brains', he caustically added. Howlett admitted that William had regularly complained to him about his weak legs and general physical debility.¹⁹ Yet Howlett had considered William's leg reflexes to be normal. Defending his decision to intercept a letter sent by Burns' to his wife, the prison governor insisted that William had made exaggerated claims about his poor health, adding that letters

were not allowed to leave the prison that might alarm relatives and friends. Accordingly, the governor had ordered William to re-write his letter to provide a more accurate account about his health. At this point, William bemoaned that he was falling to pieces.

As a last resort, William went on hunger strike. During the force-feedings that ensued, William does not appear to have resisted the stomach tube, although he did audaciously question whether Howlett had the permission of the Home Secretary. William was fed two pints of milk and cocoa through a stomach tube. During his second feeding, he began to spasm, splutter, and regurgitate his food. After the prisoner had settled down, Howlett continued his work. The following morning, William awoke with an alarmingly high temperature of 101 °F and a sharp pain in his side. Fearing that William had contracted pneumonia, Howlett removed William to a hospital cell and continued to force-feed him twice a day until he eventually died. The inquiry brought to light the fact that Howlett had never performed force-feeding before. Cheyne remained somewhat sceptical of Howlett's suggestion that the 'blood-stained frothy stuff' which Burns had coughed up was 'the sticky stuff of pneumonia'. Instead, he suggested, Howlett had noted globules of milk that, due to the excessive quantity of food being inserted into the stomach tube, had remained in William's lungs for a number of days.²⁰ Notwithstanding this suggestion, Craig and Cheyne concurred that William had died from pneumonia, a condition worsened by inhaling fluid food while being fed. No blame was attributed to Howlett.²¹ In the House of Commons, Home Secretary George Cave reported that artificial feeding had been necessary and that William's death could not be attributed to a lack of care or skill on the part of the medical officer.²²

William's plight highlights the anger felt by medical staff towards prisoners who challenged the state during wartime, the consequences being a lack of therapeutic care and an eagerness to inflict violence. Not even death could bring out remorse or compassion from the military doctors who force-fed. Howlett was too antagonistic to William's steadfast belief in the futility of war. Ironically, in rejecting international violence, William found himself subject to state-supported violence. In the context of war, it seems likely that Howlett used force-feeding primarily to discipline and punish. It also seems probable that Emmanuel Ribeiro and Clarence Henry Norman experienced force-feeding as a coercive accompaniment to a retributive system in which sovereign power was articulated through beatings, restraint, and bodily intrusion. In the First World War, force-feeding

was used as part of a broader military complex which discouraged political dissent. Hunger strikers encountered inexperienced doctors and belligerent lieutenants who shared an agenda of helping to secure military victory. This over-ruled any moral objections which doctors might have otherwise had towards feeding pacifist prisoners against their will. Staff working within the military machine were undeniably aligned to the state, perhaps more so than prison doctors employed during the suffragette hunger strike campaign. They used force-feeding to violently punish those who failed to share their views on the need to support the national war effort.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY PEACE MOVEMENTS AND HUNGER STRIKING

During war, governments are able to support methods of dealing with its opponents that would normally clash with accepted ethical behaviour. Employing prison doctors to force-feed is one example of how control is regained over the bodies of those who threaten state objectives. However politicised prisoners rarely forget their institutional experiences. They communicate their prison encounters in a range of narrative forms, most notably autobiography. Often, they bring to light occurrences that passed unnoticed until censorship is lifted. After the First World War ended, conscientious objectors initiated a robust campaign for prison reform. Leading members of the movement were articulate and determined, and they felt impassioned by their wartime incarceration. It is also likely that the unfamiliarity of conscientious objector prisoners to the normally secretive world of the prison enhanced the sense of revulsion felt towards institutional conditions. In the 1920s, peace advocates were well placed to act as spokesmen for convict prisoners; a group who tended not to possess the means or ability to convey details of English prison conditions to the general public. Most notably, Stephen Hobhouse was invited by prominent social reformer, Beatrice Webb, to lead a Prison System Enquiry Committee that included Lord Olivier, the former governor of Jamaica, and George Bernard Shaw. The results were published in the comprehensive *English Prisons Today* in 1922.²³ They initiated a wave of prison reform that has continued to this day.

Calls for prison reform were buttressed by emotive texts and pamphlets penned by former conscientious objectors. Since the late nineteenth century, middle-class individuals such as the anonymous author of *Five Years Penal Servitude* (1893) had penned memoirs that called attention to

institutional problems that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.²⁴ In the interwar period, conscientious objectors embraced this tradition by penning a considerable amount of autobiographical literature that highlighted the physical and psychological experiences of wartime imprisonment. In his *Prisoners of Hope*, published in 1918, Charles S. Peake claimed that, while imprisoned, prisoners of conscience had fatally contracted pneumonia, been removed to lunatic asylums despite being mentally sound, died from severe malnutrition and, in some instances, committed suicide.²⁵ Hunger striking and force-feeding loomed large in their accounts. The ongoing incarceration of conscientious objectors long after the end of war retained a prominent place in memories of war. In March 1919, Colonel Wedgewood rallied in the House of Commons against the ongoing imprisonment of conscientious objectors and excessive use of force-feeding, lamenting that ‘we are now forcibly-feeding more men in prison than were forcibly-fed during the whole of the women’s agitation and when it is realised that these people are being unjustly kept in prison, that we should have that aggravated by forcible-feeding seems to me to be an atrocious commentary upon the administration of the criminal law in this country.’²⁶ Richard Michael Fox was among the conscientious objectors who took part in the mass hunger strikes of 1919. In his *Drifting Men* of 1930, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Fox recollected his experiences as follows:

They were lined up and put one by one in a big chair where burly men in white overalls gripped their arms and legs, forcing their heads back. Each man had a wooden gag jammed roughly in his mouth. Through a hole in this a long rubber tube was worked down his throat. Every choking, suffocating breath only drew the tube further down till, with a sickening sensation, it reached the stomach. Milk food was then poured in through a funnel. A hunger striker from Wigan commented with grim humour, “well I’ve heard o’ food queues, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard of a feeding queue!” One man, looking very ill, his face greenish-white, was being pushed round the exercise yard by the two guards. As he fainted and collapsed he was picked up by his head, lifted to his feet and gently urged on. It was all done so deliberately, so quietly and so decorously. He was not allowed to rest for a moment. Hunger strikers were immediately moved into the dungeons—dirty, dark, half-underground cells calculated to induce depression and increase mental torture.²⁷

Fox added that:

Forcible-feeding, with its assault on personality—the white-smocked doctor, his uniformed assistants, his paraphernalia of rubber tube, gag and funnel, all mobilised to defeat the will of the prisoner—is a horrible business. I do not think there are many prisoners who have entered on a hunger strike, who would not prefer to starve to death rather than submit to this mauling, especially as after the first two days the ravenous desire for food vanishes. By staking their lives on the issue, the hunger strikers helped to force an inquiry into the conduct of the prison.²⁸

Although it actively campaigned for prison reform, the pacifist movement was unable to end prison force-feeding. Throughout the Cold War, peace protestors continued to challenge the government by staging hunger strikes. In 1959, John Francis Otter and Philip Cook, members of the Direct Action Committee against Nuclear War, went on hunger strike in Norwich while imprisoned for protesting outside a rocket site at Swaffham.²⁹ In 1962, Committee of Hundred members, Helen Allegranza, staged a forty-eight-hour fast in Holloway to remonstrate against Britain's resumption of nuclear tests.³⁰ In the same year, senior aircraftman, Brian McGee, disobeyed military instructions in sympathy with the campaign for nuclear disarmament. He found himself imprisoned at the Colchester Military Corrective Training Establishment where he also went on hunger strike.³¹

Many Cold War peace protestors were force-fed. Their relatively high public profile ensured that their protests attracted media interest. Pacifists still formed part of a broader supportive community who could draw attention to matters such as unfavourable prison treatment. Perhaps, the most prominent anti-nuclear war protestor to go on hunger strike was Pat Arrowsmith. Pat was an educated middle-class peace campaigner who ultimately served eleven prison sentences for her political activities and even took the British government to court for alleged breaches of human rights. In 1961, Pat refused food in Gateside Prison, Greenock, to protest against being made to sew canvas bags intended for use as sandbags. Prison doctors force-fed Pat four times. Pat resolutely believed in non-violent resistance and decided not to physically resist her doctors. The *Daily Express* reported Pat's mother to have said 'I have telephoned the prison and sent her a verbal message that this action of hers is foolish and oversteps the mark. If she was forced to make bullets I would have every

sympathy for her but in the circumstances I think she is going too far.’³² Pat resumed eating after four days. In the House of Commons, Labour politician, Emrys Hughes, pointed out that force-feeding had been performed before the prisoner had displayed any signs of health deterioration from hunger. ‘Is he [John Maclay, Secretary of State for Scotland] aware that there are still in this country suffragettes who recall with horror experiences of this kind in prison?’, Hughes asserted, ‘is it not time that he took a definite line to stop this?’³³

It later transpired that sewing sandbags had not actually been compulsory, although Pat later claimed that prison staff had failed to clarify this while she was hunger striking. In *The Guardian*, Labour politician, Judith Hart, asserted that the Scottish Home Department’s ‘insistence that the tube-feeding to which Miss Arrowsmith was subjected was ‘artificial feeding’ and not ‘forcible feeding’ is absurd; it is only because Miss Arrowsmith did not resist that the feeding was not ‘forcible’.³⁴ Emrys Hughes also wrote to *The Guardian* querying why prison doctors had felt a need to feed Pat ‘artificially’ before her hunger strike had started to endanger her health? Refuting suggestions that force-feeding was not a violent act when performed on a compliant patient, Hughes retorted ‘but it does not follow from this that, while she was waiting for this twice-a-day operation in the solitude of her cell, she did not suffer considerable strain and mental suffering knowing what was to come. Your view of this of course depends on what end of the rubber tube you are.’³⁵ Adding to the debate, Owen Staley suggested that Pat’s force-feeding was an effort to break the emotional will of a courageous, principled woman.³⁶ Not all letters published in *The Guardian* were entirely supportive. One read: ‘Even the most convinced pacifist must admit that a sandbag, in so far as it is a military weapon, is a very inoffensive one. Many a life has been saved by a sandbag but I never heard of one being taken by it.’³⁷ Yet most contributors took issue with the seemingly excessive punitive techniques being deployed in English prisons to tackle individuals whose ideas ran against the grain of contemporary public thought on war and peace.

In 1971, Pat reflected on her experiences of being force-fed in *The Guardian*. She recalled:

I decided to go on hunger strike because prisoners were being made to work on sandbags and CND was then campaigning against civil defence. I wanted to take some action and what else can you do but refuse to eat? To begin with I got a spell of solitary ‘for inciting a riot’ which is rather funny for a

pacifist: no books except the Bible and that's quite a subversive book. For the first few days they just let me alone. The screws were quite nice. They'd come and chat me up. They were troubled about my not eating. Then a lady doctor appeared, a rather pinched sort of woman, and said "come now, can't go on like this". I'd already decided I'd better agree with whatever was said so I made agreeing noises. She said at the end of five days with no food I couldn't be thinking clearly and I said "yes, yes, quite likely". "You need help", she said. "My help", she said. Next, I was visited by a psychiatrist and had to talk about myself for half an hour, which is always gratifying. He tried to make out that I was muddled but he couldn't do much really. He was a member of Scottish CND himself.

Pat recounted that she was later visited by a second psychiatrist, once journalists began to cover the story. 'They had to cover themselves', Pat claimed, 'to see if I was going bonkers or not. Actually going without food was quite disagreeable; I like my food and all the things I'd ever read about hunger turned out to be wrong.' For Pat, the most traumatic aspect of being force-fed was waiting for the footsteps of the doctors in the corridor leading to her cell. Pat contrasted her experiences to earlier groups such as the suffragettes. As she suggested:

The suffragettes, for instance, weren't [pacifists]; they had to resist, bite and spit and that makes things much worse... They push this tube down your throat to your stomach, you soon get a sore throat, and pour in stuff like Benger's Food. The worst part is when they pull it up again. It's like vomiting and sometimes I did vomit. If you won't co-operate, they put it through your nose and that is very painful. And I think I'd have been much more frightened if I'd known then what I know now, that there's a fair chance of pushing the tube through from the oesophagus into the windpipe and killing you... No one was particularly malevolent. Even the doctor said, "I'm not employed to do this, I'm supposed to cure people" and there was certainly relief all round when they had orders to stop.³⁸

The force-feeding of politicised prisoners always served a political purpose; it helped to quell dissidence. Yet, as Pat's statements suggest, performing force-feeding on the body of a pacifist evoked a particular sense that excessive violence was being perpetrated on an individual with no aggressive intentions. The act seemed all the more belligerent when the state authorised its use on individuals with peaceful motivations for hunger striking. What seems clear is that force-feeding continued to be deployed in England as a weapon for tackling political dissidence at times

of international crisis throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, war and conflict continued to provide discourses that helped to justify the use of force-feeding, even as punishment. During the First World War, imprisoned conscientious objectors were fed against their will despite an awareness that force-feeding could kill if performed carelessly. Wartime exigencies increased the levels of violence inflicted on prisoner groups deemed as enemies of the state and its military aims. Prison doctors and military staff treated conscientious objectors with contempt and disdain. Their scorn was reflected in deep levels of violence that marred prison experiences, including death, viscous beatings, prolonged feedings, and tubes being inserted so brutally that prisoners bled through their mouths. Politicised prisoners have complex interactions with the state. Convict prisoners tend not to have offended the state, other than having committed disruptive criminal acts. However pacifists actively oppose the state. The brutal treatment of conscientious objectors and peace protestors represented an over-exertion of the power of a state intent on preserving national security, even if this did involve inflicting physical and emotional harm.

WARTIME IRISH HUNGER STRIKES

It is worth briefly outlining the contrasting manner by which the Irish state tackled its wartime hunger strikers in the absence of a force-feeding policy. The partition of Ireland remained a divisive issue long after the Irish Civil War. In the 1920s, the Cumann na nGaedheal government consolidated the new Irish state.³⁹ A relatively small number of anti-Treaty IRA members remained determined to re-unite the island. Éamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil government, which came into power in 1932, initially acted congenially towards the IRA. Indeed, de Valera himself had been a key revolutionary figure. Upon coming to power as Taoiseach, he legalised the IRA and freed republican prisoners interned under the Cumann na nGaedheal administration. Yet tensions mounted throughout the 1930s. In 1936, de Valera outlawed the IRA after a controversial series of murders and shootings.⁴⁰ Hostility peaked during the Emergency (the term used for the Second World War in neutral Ireland). Irish public feeling towards the IRA was mixed. Given that many of its members had fought valiantly for the cause of independence just two decades earlier, a degree of sympathy existed. Nonetheless, the IRA stepped up its violence as the Second World War commenced, incurring governmental wrath.⁴¹ The onset of war coincided with a renewed period of republican violence

in both Britain and Ireland. Major British cities were bombed. Fianna Fáil implemented emergency legislation to tackle political subversion, the most penetrative of which was the Offences Against the State Act (1939). This established special criminal courts and increased garda (the Irish police force) power to prevent seditious activities. The Emergency Powers Amendment Act (1940) conferred additional powers, including extended powers to use capital punishment.⁴² Fianna Fáil justified these security policies by warning that the IRA was likely to collude with Nazi Germany, disrupt Anglo-Irish relations, and disturb Irish efforts to remain neutral.⁴³

Like many wartime leaders, de Valera used imprisonment extensively to quell political opposition. Like the conscientious objectors before them, IRA members protested by hunger striking in a climate of media censorship, and heightened public concern about political dissidence. Furthermore, de Valera was anxious to maintain good relations with the wartime British government, encouraging him to pursue ruthless strategies of neutralising militant republicanism.⁴⁴ In September 1939, de Valera appointed Gerald Boland as Minister of Justice, an IRA veteran who was steadfastly loyal to the Taoiseach and who took a hard-line stance against militant republicanism. After being swiftly rounded up and detained, a number of imprisoned republicans decided to refuse food. De Valera sternly warned that he would not grant concessions. The prisoners, de Valera insisted were pursuing a violent, subversive path against the wishes and desires of the Irish population. He mournfully added that responsibility for a prison death would rest solely with the hunger strikers themselves and not with a government who refused to give in to unreasonable demands.⁴⁵ De Valera depicted the starvation of a hunger striker as a self-imposed, if undesirable, tragedy; as a consequence of the irrational behaviour of politically subversive individuals. War allowed him to do so. National security was central to de Valera’s rhetoric. Yet under the layers of compassion that permeated de Valera’s announcement rested a crucial opportunity to permanently deal with a violent, subversive group.

The imprisonment of republicans fighting for the moral cause of a united Ireland stimulated mixed emotions. Hunger striking was deeply entrenched in the Irish psyche as a morally just action, a last resort against political injustice. The strong republican credentials of many of the protestors presented an irreconcilable ideological quandary. In October 1939, Con Lehane, a solicitor and later co-founder of republican political party Clann na Poblachta, went on the first reported hunger and thirst strike of the Emergency to protest against his detainment at Arbour Hill military

prison.⁴⁶ Labour politician, William Norton, sardonically asked Boland in the Dáil: ‘am I to understand that hunger strikes or thirst strikes of this nature which were right in 1922 and 1923 are wrong in 1939?’⁴⁷ Norton’s shrewd comment pointed to the deeply embedded positioning of hunger striking in the Irish national psyche. Despite endorsing some releases, de Valera maintained that he was still willing to let hunger strikers die if necessary. In November, eminent republican and prisoner rights campaigner, Madam Maude Gonne MacBride, wrote to the President of Ireland, Douglas Hyde, pleading with him to intervene in a hunger strike being staged by Patrick McGrath. As part of her impassioned appeal, MacBride reminded Hyde that Patrick still had an English bullet lodged in his chest received during the Easter Rising. The bullet had lodged too close to the heart to allow for safe surgical removal. MacBride also pointed out that Patrick had fought valiantly in the War of Independence. She emotively warned that ‘if one of them is allowed to die it will create a bitterness which nothing will be able to repair and we have had bitterness enough in our country since 1921.’⁴⁸ Nonetheless, de Valera remained firm despite the crisis of conscience produced by the idea of allowing an eminent former comrade to die.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the hunger strikers were released and conveyed to a nearby nursing home.⁵⁰

Patrick’s premature release was a victory for Irish republicanism. Nonetheless, it ultimately had lasting implications for the IRA. On 23 December 1939, fifty IRA members raided the Irish army’s ammunition store in the Magazine Fort, Phoenix Park, stealing over a million rounds of ammunition. The raid heightened public concern about IRA activity, clashing as it did with the broader context of international conflict. After the raid, garda officers arrested and detained a number of individuals. Patrick McGrath was one of the arrested men, causing de Valera to regret his earlier decision to release hunger strikers.⁵¹ Indeed, he faced severe criticism in the Dáil for having given way earlier to McGrath’s protest.⁵² From hereon, de Valera refused to succumb to further pressure to authorise the release of hunger strikers. The raid also prompted Boland to swiftly implement the amended Emergency Powers Act.

As Eunan O’Halpin suggests, hunger strikes now stopped being an effective means of extracting concessions. What followed was a purposeful wartime clampdown on political subversion.⁵³ In February 1940, Anthony D’Arcy, Seán ‘Jack’ McNeela, Tomás MacCurtain, Michael Traynor, Thomas Grogan, Jack Plunkett, and John Lyons went on hunger strike at Arbour Hill Internment Camp.⁵⁴ The prisoners declared that, in the event

of a death, successive prisoner groups would pursue hunger strikes and take up the fight.⁵⁵ Michael Traynor later recalled that ‘day followed day. I cannot remember any particular incident, except that regularly three times a day an orderly arrived with our food, which we of course refused to take. We were by now nursing our strength realising that this was a grim struggle, a struggle to the death. We jokingly made forecasts of who would be the first to die.’ Notably, Michael recounted that the prison medical staff, as is often the case in incidences of prison self-starvation, remained mostly sympathetic and accorded the protestors kind, humane treatment.⁵⁶

Jack Plunkett was the brother of Joseph Plunkett, one of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising. In March 1940, his mother, Josephine Mary, wrote to Cardinal Joseph McRory pleading for his intervention. She steeped her letter with allegations of rampant immorality in convict prisons. Republican prisoners, she claimed, including a young seventeen-year-old, were imprisoned in Mountjoy alongside sexual degenerates, a tacit reference to the potential exposure of prisoners to homosexuality.⁵⁷ Maud Gonne MacBride also wrote to McRory. As an active campaigner for improvement in Irish prison conditions, she framed her letter in terms of the cruelty of prison life and the harsh, demeaning rules in place that structured prison life. She claimed that ‘non-recognition of political status leads to endless trouble, confusion and often to tragedy.’ To fortify her point, she wrote:

So we have men like Jack Plunkett—whose family, God knows, have made sacrifices for Ireland which should have spared them this new torment—on hunger strike for sixteen days and people wondering how long they will last...none of these distressing things would have occurred if the prison code laid down recognition for political status. Is it necessary that another prisoner should die or another prisoner have to be transferred to a lunatic asylum before the prison code is altered to recognise political status?⁵⁸

Nonetheless, sympathy towards the hunger strikers remained confined mostly to committed republicans. While the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Caitlin Bean ní Cléirigh, publicly conceded in March that ‘it is sad to think that the brother of Joseph Plunkett is on hunger strike at Arbour Hill while preparations are being made to honour the memory of the Easter week leaders,’ he added that ‘it is sadder still to think that the uprising of 1916 against a foreign enemy should be so distorted as to be used as an excuse for condoning armed attacks on our people.’ While acknowledging Plunkett’s

irrefutable republican credentials, ní Cléirigh portrayed the remaining IRA as a group of individuals who misunderstood the true nature of the War of Independence and the Civil War.⁵⁹ Ultimately, the dilemma of allowing hunger strikers to starve even despite their close connections to national heroes of an earlier generation failed to weaken de Valera's resolve. While removing a small group of prisoners from prison to an internment camp appeared, on the surface, to be a somewhat trifling demand, the symbolic implications of acknowledging the IRA's political and military status, fortified with concern that further IRA internees might stage protests, remained omnipresent. In this instance, the state firmly maintained its sovereign right to maintain control over the prison environment. Moreover, the death of a hunger striker would present a stark warning to other potential protestors that national security interests needed to take precedence over IRA deaths for the foreseeable future.

When two deaths did occur, the attitudes of even hard-liners such as ní Cléirigh softened. On 16 April 1940, Anthony D'Arcy died following fifty-two days on hunger strike. Throughout his protest, Anthony had refused medical examination. At a subsequent inquest, ex-IRA Chief of Staff and lawyer Seán MacBride (and son of Maud Gonne MacBride) addressed the jury stating that individuals convicted for political reasons should be awarded political status. He accused the government of inhumanity and intolerance.⁶⁰ The verdict read 'exhaustion from want of nourishment', although the jury recommended that action should be taken in relation to other hunger strikers.⁶¹ In the face of sharp criticism, de Valera re-reiterated that hunger strikers could not dictate government policy.⁶² Three days after Anthony's death (and four hours after the protest had been called off), Jack McNeela died after a fifty-five day hunger strike. Jack was the nephew of Fianna Fáil TD Michael Kilroy.⁶³ At the inquest that followed, Seán MacBride charged Boland with responsibility for the unnecessary deaths of two republican men.⁶⁴

Whereas the death of Terence MacSweeney and others had caused international outrage and elicited considerable sympathy for the cause of full Irish autonomy, Emergency-period hunger strikes took place in an environment that lacked overwhelming support for IRA violence and where partition had been gradually, sometimes reluctantly, accepted. Notably, although D'Arcy's death received media coverage in both Ireland and England, the *Daily Mirror* speculated that 'Dublin, with the exception of the small IRA following, appears unmoved by the news of D'Arcy's death.'⁶⁵ If accurately reported, this situation compared unfavourably with

earlier incidences of death from hunger strike. In the 1940s, prisoners were not dying in support of the Irish nation, they died because they opposed it. As John Maguire suggests, de Valera was essentially the first politician to successfully undermine the power of the hunger strike as a weapon of political confrontation.⁶⁶

Emergency-period hunger strikes were limited in scope and failed to elicit political change. Faced with a government resolutely opposed to conceding to IRA demands, prisoners and internees realised the futility of starving themselves and, for the most part, refrained from hunger striking following the deaths of Anthony D'Arcy and Jack McNeela. When hunger strikes did take place, the IRA struggled to amass public support or maintain group cohesion while in prison. Public enthusiasm for an internal war against the Irish and Northern Irish states remained limited, a backdrop that did little to boost morale in the prison. When assessed in terms of their political effectiveness, the protests had limited impact. Indeed, de Valera's determinedness not to concede to prisoner demands can be conceived as a Fianna Fáil victory. In many ways, this scenario compares to the outcome of the conscientious objector hunger strikes pursued in the First World War, protests that aroused some degree of humanitarian sympathy towards the plight of prisoners but ultimately failed to attract new recruits. Indeed, the British government, like de Valera's wartime government, successfully re-asserted its authority in maintaining civil order against a backdrop of international crisis.

Nonetheless, imprisoned republicans did help to draw public attention to the adverse prison conditions which they encountered. Upon release, they conveyed evocative details of alleged institutional brutality and violence. Their experiences unintentionally helped to shape a broader discussion of institutional conditions in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Former IRA Chief-of-Staff, Seán McCaughey, went on hunger strike in April 1946 at Portlaoise Prison. Four years earlier, Seán had been sentenced to death for assaulting Stephen Hayes, ex-Chief of Staff of the IRA and an alleged gardaí informer. Seán's sentence was subsequently commuted to life. Notably, Seán went on hunger strike to protest against the brutal and inhumane institutional conditions in which he resided. After sixteen days of refusing food, he refrained from drinking. Seán died on the twenty-third day of his hunger strike (and eighth day of his hunger and thirst strike). In May 1946, the Republican Prisoners' Release Association passed a resolution expressing 'the horror and detestation of the inhuman treatment of Seán MacCaughey' and demanding 'the immediate ending

of the torture of his comrades'. Con Lehane claimed that McCaughey had been 'driven to death by inhuman conditions in Portlaoise Prison' and described the prisoner as the thirteenth victim of de Valera's prison system.⁶⁷

A jury returned a verdict of death caused by heart failure brought on by inanition and dehydration caused by a lack of food and fluid intake. Importantly, the inquest provided Seán MacBride with an important opportunity to initiate a discussion of Irish prison conditions.⁶⁸ MacBride brought to the witness stand a sense of emotion and drama that the public could identify with. During the proceedings, he brought to light the fact that Seán McCaughey had not been allowed outside into the fresh air or sunlight during four years of imprisonment. In consequence, Seán had suffered numerous nervous breakdowns. When asked by MacBride, 'If you had a dog, would you treat it in that fashion?', Dr Duane, after a brief pause, reluctantly replied 'no'. MacBride concluded his scathing indictment of Seán's imprisonment by asserting, 'my submission is that the treatment meted out to this man was responsible for his death in this place called a prison, which is a hell'.⁶⁹ The jury concurred, stating that 'the conditions existing in the prison were not all that could be desired according to evidence furnished'.⁷⁰ Following the inquest, an anonymous letter sent to de Valera on the subject of Seán's death compared Irish prison conditions to the barbarity of Russian institutions. Moreover, allegations of prison brutality provided a platform upon which to campaign for the release of other interned prisoners, most notably the son of Tomás MacCurtain (the murdered Lord Mayor of Cork who had preceded Terence MacSweeney in the position).⁷¹

McCaughey's death reinvigorated public interest in prisons. Angered by Seán's plight, in May 1946, the Farmers Party and the Labour Party called for an inquiry into conditions at Portlaoise, although this was defeated. Seanad Éireann passed a motion calling for an inquiry. A subsequent report condemned prison conditions, devoting a dedicated section to the plight of political prisoners who appeared to have been treated particularly harshly. The findings of the report formed the basis of Labour Party prison policies from the late 1940s. Between 1946 and 1947, a number of administrative changes were made aimed at improving material conditions in Irish penal institutions. These included an increase in the number of visits, extended privileges, improved diet, more appropriate recreation facilities, and a general trend towards rehabilitation rather than reform.⁷² Indeed, following the McCaughey revelations, serious efforts were made

to improve conditions in institutions such as Portlaoise which witnessed a dramatic improvement in prison conditions and in areas such as prison diet.⁷³ Perhaps more significantly, the death of Seán McCaughey served as a springboard for the various disparate political elements that would eventually coalesce around MacBride and his call for the formation of a new constitutional republican political platform. In 1948, Clann na Poblachta replaced Fianna Fáil in power.⁷⁴

Notably, Seán McCaughey's prison death coincided with a hunger strike initiated in Belfast Prison by David Fleming whose plight aroused similar concerns about Northern Irish prison conditions. In 1944, twenty-eight prisoners, led by former IRA Chief of Staff Hugh McAteer, went on hunger strike in Belfast Jail to protest against poor quality food and unhealthy conditions. Force-feeding was not performed as the prison governor and the Minister of Home Affairs chose to ignore the protest.⁷⁵ Yet David Fleming was force-fed in 1946. He also claimed to have suffered violent manhandling during the procedure.⁷⁶ Notably, David went on hunger strike in response to alleged brutality and victimisation by prison staff, not to secure political status or release. He was subject to brutal beatings. On one occasion, so much of his blood splattered over the cell walls that they needed to be whitewashed.⁷⁷ In 1946, David staged two hunger strikes. The first lasted for eighty-two days; the second for forty-eight. During his first hunger strike, David was force-fed for five days, although the prison doctors were unable to pursue this treatment for longer as David was prone to violently attacking them.⁷⁸ After his last assault on the prison doctor, David found himself placed in a padded cell. Minister of Home Affairs Edmond Warnock brought in a psychiatric specialist to assess David's mental health. The specialist found no reason to diagnose the prisoner as mentally unstable. Warnock invoked the diagnostically vague term 'religious mania'. However, Fleming's hunger strike was too purposeful for a convincing claim of insanity to be formed.⁷⁹ Given a tendency of prison medical staff to proclaim hunger strikers as mentally unsound, Warnock's efforts can be interpreted as an attempt to permanently remove a troublesome politicised prisoner from the institution. Towards the end of his second protest, David was released and transported in a weak, emaciated condition to Pembroke Nursing Home, Dublin, a journey of over hundred miles.⁸⁰ Despite having been ordered not to return to Belfast, David was apprehended in September 1947 at Nutts Corner Airport, Belfast, after arriving from Dublin in an Aer Lingus plane. He then went on a further hunger strike.⁸¹

David's experiences can be situated in a broader context of discussion about Northern Irish prison conditions. Two years earlier, questions had been raised in the House of Stormont about whether prisoners were hunger striking in Belfast Prison to protest against harsh, humiliating institutional conditions.⁸² Labour Party MP, Jack Beattie, had claimed that prisoners were being regularly subjected to unnecessary cell searches and strippings, as well as indecent searching by the warders who accompanied their intrusive cavity inspections with verbal abuse and insults. Beattie also pointed out that politically motivated prisoners were being placed in cells where they were forced to associate with individuals committed for sexual crimes, to listen 'to their filthy and degrading talk'. In addition, Beattie claimed that food rations fell far below the authorised allowance. It was also badly cooked and served on unwashed plates. Milk was watered-down and cocoa served in tins containing remnants of turnips and vegetables. Beattie insisted that 'Northern Ireland is the only place in the world where you find cruelty existing to the extent that I outlined.' He concluded his powerful indictment by announcing 'we are more akin to the Nazis in Germany than we are to the democratic world outside it', adding his intention to appeal to the American Red Cross and the Council of Civil Liberties.⁸³

Although Stormont MPs paid scant attention to the political dimensions of David Fleming's hunger strike, a number of them expressed concern over his motivations for hunger striking; rooted as they were in broader questions about prison conditions. Fleming's protest raised important questions about the extent to which imprisonment—with its monotony, loss of individuality, and endless punishment—truly reformed or aimlessly punished. In the House of Stormont, Mr Healy suggested that 'the present [prison] buildings ought to be blasted to the ground' and called for a public inquiry into the state of Northern Irish prisons. Healey emotively concluded by pleading:

I ask you, if you have any humane instincts left in you, not to look on this from a prejudiced point of view. Think of this boy Fleming being brought into his cell by four or five warders and there beaten. His skull was crashed in and he was left lying for hours with blood flowing from his head. Is it any wonder that to-day he is on hunger strike? Is it any wonder that previous to that he acted in an irrational manner? Surely if we are not blinded by prejudice and carried away with political sentiment, the time has come when matters should be looked into and an impartial inquiry held.⁸⁴

It seems evident that Irish republicans were treated with undue harshness and violence while imprisoned during the Emergency and Second World War. War justified their detainment and encouraged hostility between staff and prisoners. The context of war also allowed politicians, including de Valera, to support actions that would normally be deemed harsh, including letting a number of hunger strikers die. His strategy was successful in terms of quelling hunger strikes but raised broader humanitarian concerns. Yet, as is often the case when wartime prisoners are treated harshly, prisoners amassed considerable public attention when news of the violence inflicted upon them reached beyond the prison walls, in this instance, raising calls for prison reform.

CONCLUSION

During wartime, politicised prisoners often pursue activities that seem to threaten the integrity of the state. They find themselves exposed to imprisonment and a relative lack of public sympathy in their plight. A need to protect national security interests justifies particularly brutal methods of force-feeding or, in some instances, a willingness to let starvation run its natural course. Censorship and appeals made to the over-riding concern of securing military victory ensure that the fate of politicised hunger strikers remains mostly hidden from public view. Nonetheless, politicised prisoners are often adept at drawing attention to the harsh conditions in which they reside, either through their supportive political network or through their own subsequent writings. This produces a mixed emotional response. While public support for conscientious objection or IRA activity was minimal in the contexts discussed in this chapter, the idea that suffering was being inflicted upon individuals forced to live in inhumane conditions clashed with public sensibilities on how humans should be treated. The prisoners had suffered enough by being isolated from society. Was it really necessary to beat, punish, and brutally force-feed them? In many ways, wartime hunger strikers are relatively powerless in comparison to their peacetime counter-parts. They feel the weight of sovereign power working against them due to the additional powers conferred on wartime governments. But paradoxically, it is these groups of hunger strikers that historically made the most inroads into campaigning for

institutional reform. The harsh treatment meted out to them remained vivid in their memories, encouraging participation in prisoner welfare movements. Perhaps the greatest achievements of the hunger strikers analysed in this chapter was their ability to raise a broader set of questions about the milieu of prison life, even if their disparate political aspirations ultimately failed.

NOTES

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